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ATG Interviews David Tyckoson

Head, Reference Services — CSU Fresno

by Tom Gilson (Head, Reference Services, College of Charleston Libraries) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

David Tyckoson recently published an article in American Libraries that has caused quite a bit of comment. See the latest issue for a bevy of letters to the editor. — TG

ATG: There has been an obvious increase in electronic reference publishing, but at the same time no let up in the number of print resources. How does the diversity of formats, not to mention the continued volume of publishing, impact library reference collections?

DT: In terms of the volume of sources, it is certainly greater than it was 15 years ago. But even when we were just dealing with print resources, we always had a considerable volume. There were multiple sources covering the same topic, as well as multiple editions of the same reference. But at the same time, we had well-established channels for identifying and evaluating these reference works ranging from advertising flyers to bibliographies like *ALA's Guide to Reference Books* and sophisticated reviewing sources like the "Reference Books Bulletin" in *Booklist*.

ATG And the advent of electronic resources changed this?

DT: Not initially. At first we were dealing with a new format, CD-ROM, but the references being published were familiar. They were tried and true standbys being published in a new format. It was not a selection issue. CD-ROM was a better way to do it. Speed and ease of use were the issues. The CD-ROM version of the *MLA* was a tremendous improvement over the print in terms of usefulness. Admittedly, these sources were pretty expensive and many of us may have suffered from sticker shock but we adjusted. After all, patrons loved it. But in the process, we lost something. In order to cover the cost, libraries began canceling peripheral indexes and our collections started becoming very similar.

ATG: But today there is a variety of electronic products on the market.

DT: Yes, there is no doubt about that. These first CD-ROMs were successful so more publishers started getting involved and they were interested in creating new products, not just electronic versions of old ones. While these new products have given librarians more resources to work with, it also has made our decisions far more complicated. These new products do not go through the traditional review process so we have had to find alternative ways to make decisions. Now, there is more direct marketing and the use of product trials in making selection decisions. We also have to consider hardware needs, which further complicates matters. And, this con-

cern about the right equipment is even more critical now that we are networking. The capability to network resources has a tremendous effect by making resources available remotely wherever and whenever a patron wants them. It is great for service, but it requires even more technical expertise on the part of the librarian. A reference department may have a mixture of stand-alone CD-ROMs, networked LANs and Web accessible databases, so the decision is not only what do I want, but how do I deliver it. All this change may not be a revolution in reference collections, but it is certainly an significant evolution.

ATG: Given the volume and variety of reference materials on the market, how would you define a balanced reference collection in today's library? How can a head of reference or a collection development librarian build a balanced reference collection?

DT: That depends on community needs. Every library serves a unique local community and that community defines your idea of a balanced collection. There is no overall definition. Some libraries may need more science materials, others more literature. It is the local community and their needs that decide. At CSU-Fresno, we have learned over a long period of time what programs are taught and which ones demand library research. We buy sources that fit those programs. For example, we purchase lots of business and health science materials, but little other than the basics in the field of law. This is because we have business and nursing programs, but no law school. The most important knowledge that a reference librarian should have is not how to use computers or reference books, but an understanding of the needs of the community that the library is supposed to serve. But today, librarians have to make another big decision. We have to decide on the format and that decision is influenced by a variety of factors, and one of the most influential is networking. Networks give smaller libraries better access than ever before. With consortia and state library agreements, smaller libraries have benefited, even more than larger ones. Many small libraries are able to buy into networked resources at a relatively low cost, making information available to their communities that would not be possible any other way.

ATG: In a recent NY Times article on the Web version of Grove's Dictionary of Art, Judith E. Holliday, fine arts librarian at Cornell, was quoted as saying that the print version of the Dictionary was doomed. Is she overstating the case or is she on target? What about print versions of other subject encyclopedias?

DT: She is overstating the case. The print version of the *Dictionary of Art* is doomed only if **Grove** decides not to publish it. It is disappointing to see publishers reverting to only electronic formats. They do not want to publish in print. The *Academic American Encyclopedia* is no longer available in print, the future of the print *Encyclopedia Britannica* is not all certain, and I am afraid this may be a trend. Popular culture on the Web is great because you can produce added value like visual images in art or audio in music. But most subject encyclopedias cover information that is well-established. I will still go to the print if I am looking for basic background information and patrons tend to go to the print when they are in the library.

ATG: Isn't that force of habit? We go to the print because that is what we are used to doing.

DT: That could be, but often, print is more convenient. Sources like *Statistical Abstract* and the various almanacs are good examples. Authors and editors of these print resources have spent years developing and perfecting these references to make them easy and convenient. Web products have not developed to that point. They are more complicated to use. The learning curve is more involved and the enhancements are not always relevant to the background information they are trying to provide. Just because you can use a computer does not mean you can use a particular database. People may understand computers, but they do not understand the organization of a database. And some people do not understand computers. I live in Fresno, an economically diverse community, and not everyone has a computer. At CSU Fresno the librarians teach our students e-mail, Windows, file management and other basic computing skills. We call the course "Foundations and Connections" and it is well attended. Not all students have these skills.

ATG: Originally, Grove's Dictionary of Art was also being released as a CD-ROM, aimed at the individual user. Do you think CD-ROM products of major sources like this still have a place in reference collections? How about CD-ROM versions of less popular sources?

DT: Microsoft's *Encarta* was marketed to the individual and it has done pretty well. But, I am not a big fan of stand-alone CD-ROMs. They need dedicated equipment and are limited to a single user. Price is also a major factor for me. If the price is similar, it is no contest. We try to get the networked version or a Web product. I will get low use, but significant titles like the *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, in print rather than CD-ROM.

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As you know a lot of the government's publications come out in CD-ROM. For the most part they sit in a drawer until someone asks for them, which is rare. Recently, I shocked our catalogers when they asked me what to do with the CD-ROM that came with the print volume of the *Almanac of Business and Industrial Financial Ratios*. I told them to throw it away. It is just a PDF file of the printed pages and adds no value whatsoever. Career Guidance's *College Catalogs on CD-ROM* are another case in point. While we did not throw it away, I actually preferred the microfiche. The CD-ROM version is just a PDF file, an image requiring electronic equipment, making it harder to access, with no benefit. For electronic products to provide added value, they have to provide added utility to the information, like letting the user manipulate data or be able to search through the fulltext. When a product comes out that is simply the reproduction of the print version in an electronic format, the print remains the more useful option.

ATG: But there is a Web version of the *College Catalogs* available now? The catalogs are still PDF files but the searching is more user-friendly.

DT: Yes, I know, and my preference is to go with a more searchable Web product or at least a networked CD-ROM whenever possible. I was just using the *College Catalogs* as an example. I have a problem with CD-ROMs that are just PDF files and that are not really searchable and offer no added value to the print or microform versions.

ATG: The growth of electronic reference works has implications for the way selection decisions are made. Are there enough reviewing sources for Web and other electronic products? Are reviewing sources enough? What about database trials or preview copies of CD-ROMs? Are they more helpful?

DT: No, there are not enough reviewing sources but it is getting better. One of the problems with reviews of electronic sources is that by the time they come out, the product has often been changed. So, the timeliness of reviews is a major concern. We rely a tremendous amount on trials of "big ticket" items. But there are so many levels of some of these products. How do you choose among the various offerings of IAC, EBSCO and UMI? It is very difficult even with trials. When you get the trial, the publisher will inevitably give you access to their entire product line. If you decide to buy it, you may only be able to afford a segment of the entire package. Just within the IAC set of databases, for example, there are dozens of options: *General Periodicals Index*, *Academic Index*, *Expanded Academic Index*, *General Reference Center*, *General Reference Center Gold*—the

list goes on and on. And this is not to pick on IAC, since all of the vendors do this now. You may be happy with the one that you try, but be less happy with the version that you actually purchase. The fact that vendors are taking the same information and repackaging it in so many different ways adds to the complexity of deciding which services to purchase. With the less pricey items, we rely on reviews or just buy it. If a low priced CD-ROM does not work out, we simply do not buy it again, when a new edition is released. It is always worth \$100—\$200 to take a shot.

ATG: This expanded world of reference products also has budgetary implications. How can reference and collection development librarians best convince administrators that funding needs to be expanded too? What strategies have worked for you?

DT: Budgeting is often the most difficult issue in collection development. It depends a great deal on the local administration. Some institutions want to be "cutting edge" and are on the lookout for electronic resources. But if you want to be "cutting edge" it is going to cost. Either in terms of more money added to the budget, or at the cost of reference books not added to the collection. This has to be made clear to the people making the financial decisions. We need to be on guard that we do not cut into the core sources that meet our community's needs to get high tech access to peripheral sources. We are fortunate at CSU-Fresno. Our administration does a pretty good job and does not want to sacrifice core sources. In fact, the California State system has established a **core electronic collection** including *Lexis/Nexis*, *CARL UnCover*, *Dow Jones News Retrieval*, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

"It is disappointing to see publishers reverting to only electronic formats." These services were chosen as essential

for all CSU students and are available on every campus. We are currently in the process of establishing a **system-wide set of core journals** that will be available electronically as well. The idea behind this **Journal Access Core Collection (JACC)** is that we are telling the vendors which titles we want in electronic form rather than purchasing the package that they have put together. It will be interesting to see to what degree this approach succeeds.

The other issue that comes up when buying these services is what are we buying? If I get IAC for ten years and then switch to EBSCO, what do I have for my ten years investment with IAC? I am left with nothing tangible, or even intangible, for that matter. Suppose I decide to subscribe to the *Gale Group's* new *Biography Resource Center* and drop my print subscriptions to *Contemporary Authors* and some of the other print

sources contained in this new service like the *St. James Press* titles. What happens if the *Gale Group* decides to sell *St. James Press* or decides to alter the *Biography Resource Center's* content, or the unthinkable, ends up going out of business? We have changed from buying information to leasing it and the ramifications of this change are not always clear. From my perspective, I want continued access to what I have already paid for, and with electronic products like this, I have no guarantees. With print, at least I can always keep what I have already purchased.

ATG: This is a very exciting and challenging time to be a reference librarian. What about the future? What type of reference collections will we be working with in five years? Ten years?


DT: Future predictions are tough. I wish I could have predicted the Web taking off the way it has. When I first saw the Internet it was the domain of a very few computer types, but it got easier to use and there developed a ton of content. But getting back to your question, things will change, but we will still have all of the current formats. There will be more electronic products but print will remain viable. I think we will still have the same number of print resources being published. *Christine Nasso* of the *Gale Group* remarked at a recent *ALA* program that "publishers still have to feed the beast." And what I think she meant by that is that print products feed into electronic products. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two. I see that continuing. If anything goes down, it will be microforms.

But the real thing to watch is the impact of networking. The network revolution is even more important than the initial computer revolution. When the first computers came along, they

gave us the power to improve our individual work performance. When we linked those computers together and shared information and data, each one of us acquired the power and the knowledge of all of the individual members of the network. It is the power of the network that has allowed the Internet to play such a dominant role in society in such a short time. And of course, there will be something that no one anticipates which will come along and change everything again.

There is only one thing that will not change. What reference librarians do will be the same: provide one-on-one service to people needing information. Our tools will change and evolve, but working with the individual patron remains the reason we are in this business.

ATG: Thanks again for taking time out to talk to us.

DT: No problem. I enjoyed it. 

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